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ABSTRACT

Aime Cesaire is one of the foremost French-speaking blacks in twentieth century literature. The concept of negritude--referring to the culture of French-speaking blacks--is often associated with his name. This paper discusses his life and work, and explores his life from his birth in Martinique, his early years, the years spent in Paris, and his return to Martinique shortly before World War II. Particular attention is given to "Notes on a Return to the Native Land"--Cesaire's best known work. Seven different themes occurring in this work are identified and representative passages are quoted. A bibliography is included. (DB)

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"Alienation, Art, and Affirmation in the Work of Aimé Césaire"

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Aimé Césaire was born the second of six children on June 26, 1913, in Basse Pointe, northern Martinique. As the son of a dressmaker and a tax collector, his family status was near that of rural poverty; nevertheless, the Césaire family did not ressemble the class of illiterate agricultural laborers, composing most of the black Martinicans. The family made great efforts to absorb French cultural norms; unlike other black Martinicans of their status, they possessed a strong will to rise above their degree of poverty. Aimé's father read to his children in French the poetry of Victor Hugo and the other French prose classics. It was an accepted fact that to be limited to Creole was to sustain an inferior social position; consequently, Césaire grew without accepting Creole as "a vehicle for Martinical cultural expression."[1] Aimé's grandmother taught him to read and write French by the age of four; consequently, this was the basis for a nurturing environment where being black and French was not perceived as conflicts of daily existence.[2] Later Aimé would find it difficult to sever cultural ties and assimilation that he had so easily sought and absorbed. One cannot imagine the nature of Césaire's plight as an aspiring artist to be an immigrant within his own native society.

At the age of eleven Aimée's family moved to Fort-de-France, the island capital, where he was able to attend the only French Antillean high school, Lycée Schoelcher. There he met and developed a very close relationship with Léon-Gontran Damas from French Guiana. His friend was destined to be influential and to contribute to formulating the notion of négritude. The two organized school soccer teams on which Césaire showed early signs of influential leadership. After a period of athletic enthusiasm, Aimé gave up sports and developed an intellectual direction. Gentle, polite, gracious, as a young boy, he concealed his restless, volcanic spirit that was to develop into an artistic violence.

While at the Lycée where Aimé studied and prepared for the state exams on language, history, and culture of France, he also listened attentively to the accomplished geographer, Eugène Revert. The latter enriched the program with revelations of the uniqueness of the fauna and flora, geography, and tropical richness of Martinique. This native revelation was later to influence and be incorporated into Césaire's poetry which would reveal the true, "un-French character"[3] of Césaire. Upon Aimé's graduation from the Lycée in 1931 with honors in French, Latin, English, and history, Dr. Revert recommanded him to the distinguished Parisian Lycée Louis-le-Grand for preparation and later to the Ecole Normale Supérieure. When Aimé left Martinique in 1931, he had no regrets, as he anticipated the fulfillment of Paris from all its richness. He had not conceived of any heroic return to his native soil which was to follow an unforseen ethnic soul upheaval during his eight-year stay in Paris. Ardently he pursued his studies, hoping to gain a place at the Ecole Normale Supérieure.

At that time he met two Senagalese, Ousmane Socé, who was eventually to be the first ambassador to the United States, and Léopold Sedar Senghor, the future first president of the liberated Sénégal. As students at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, the three found common ties of friendship which influenced Aimé's sense of values as a black. Senghor collaborated with Damas and Césaire during 1934-35, in a common venture to unite culturally and socially the students from Africa and the West Indies. The Caribbeans traditionally thought themselves superior and European in culture and in skin tone toward the inferior uncivilized savages of Africa. The Martinicans were more adamant politically, and took as their models a European archetype.

After the organization of the student paper, The Black Student (l'Etudiant Noir), Aimé began to develop a sense of belonging to an ethnic community. Under the influence of Senghor, he had rejected an assimilation into the radical Paris-based journal Légitime Défense, in 1932, as Aimé did not share its communist, surrealists leanings or its conviction that culture renewal comes after political revolution. Later in 1935 in the student paper Césaire expressed his firm opinion against the cultural assimilation against the blacks. These two events and his associations with fellow blacks of Africa and America, Senghor and Damas, contributed toward a cristalization of his négritude, calling for the re-establishment of black values. He was confronted with a distinction among his African friends who embodied black history through African languages and tribal customs which he and other West Indians had been deprived by the combination of Colonialism and slavery. With such differences it was obvious that the concept of négritude would develop into something quite different for the Senagalese, Senghor, as statesman and poet, and for the Martinican Césaire, as parliamentarian and writer. Unlike his close friend, Senghor, who accepted catholicism early in life, Césaire did not become an early believer, perhaps because his father was a free thinker, or perhaps because Catholicism was the faith of his colonial peer. Consequently, he never underwent this deep spiritual crisis of conciliation with the European faith and affirmation of his black values yet to be defined.

Aimé's health became somewhat weak during the strenuous preparation for the Ecole Normale. After the successful examinations during the summer of 1935, he took an unexpected trip to Yugoslavia with a friend and classmate, Peter Guberina. It was during that short sojourn that he developed a certain nostalgia for his homeland, perhaps because the name of the island, Martinska, was similar to that of his native soil. This period provided, also, a spiritual, moving experience which led to the realization of numerous notes. After four years he had produced a pre-war version, Notebook of a Return to a Native Land (Cahier d'un retour au pays natal). He had already experienced an ironic contradiction in his concept of négritude. He had rejected the idea of cultural assimilaton of the black during the same period when he was absorbing and assimilating the culture, literature, and language of his colonial country, while preparing his exams for the Ecole Normale Supérieure. While actively participating in the production of the paper, Black Student, (L'Etudiant Noir), Aimé met a Suzanne Roussy, a Martinican woman whom he married in 1937. Later the two became collaborators for the Martinican cultural magazine, Tropiques, (Tropics), 1941-45. During that same time in Paris, Césaire was studying with Professor Le Senne who oriented Césaire and his friends toward a conception of a black cultural archetype, transcending all geographical frontiers.

Between 1929 and 1934 Aimé and his circle had established contact with Africans, West Indians, and American Blacks who frequented a literary salon run by Mademoiselle Nardal, founder and co-author of Review of the Black World (Revue de Monde Noir). Aimé did not frequent the salon, because he felt the followers were too bourgeois, mulatto, Martinican middle class, and too Catholic. Nevertheless, the black writers from the United States had made a strong impression on Césaire. The Harlem Renaissance introduced him to Claude McKay. This Jamaican's novel, Banjo, published in French in 1928, gave Césaire much food for thought. This novel offered an explanation for the alienation of black intellectuals. As an artist who had rejected his own Creole background, Aimé responded to the Harlem Renaissance writers as a new collective black voice. After his second return to his native soil in 1939 with Suzanne to assume teaching, he authored in his Tropiques of July, 1941, an introduction to a translated section of poems. Here Césaire expressed appreciation for the new generation of black poets:

"The dominant feeling of the black poet is one of malaise, better still of intolerance. Intolerance of reality because it is sordid, of this world because it is a cage, of life because it has been stolen on the high road of the sun."[4]

Shortly after his return, France succumbed to the Nazi Occupation, and the French Islands felt the impact of the puppet Vichy Regime until 1943. It has been suggested that Césaire and his group assumed their literary attack against the Vichy regime creatively in surreal language so that the authorities could not understand them. Aimé carefully observed the racism overtly demonstrated by the French sailors contained by the United States Navy. This racism exposed the European attitude of superiority over the colonials in their own land and lowered them to the level of second-class citizens. From 1941 to 1945 Aimé and his closest literary collaborators defined very clearly in their Tropiques the ideological ties between the developing Martinican version of négritude and the culture of European modernism. The magazine was the synthesis of Césaire's previous accomplishments.

Racism was probably one of the major reasons that Aimé assumed the fight against colonialism after the war. In this vein Aimé was elected in 1945 to the post of mayor of Fort-de-France and gave preference to politics. This succession of involvement included his commitment to black singularity, colonial communism, and the identification as a surrealist poet, since he had adhered to this movement in France. The term négritude was rarely used in Tropiques, for it might inadvertently have aroused the censor; nevertheless, the message was there. Also the meeting between André Breton, father of Surrealism, and Aimé Césaire in April, 1941, did give direction to Tropiques. Césaire had already begun to write in a distinclty surrealist vein, but the encounter of Breton convinced him that he was a man with similar goals to those of Aimé. Césaire later admitted that:

> "Breton brought us boldness; he helped us to take a straightforward position: he shortened our search and hesitation."[5]

Surrealism offered Césaire a poetic mode, intensely subjective, proclaiming to cast off all those restraints that had brought estrangement from man himself. Aimé Césaire's interpretation of this surrealist revolution was that of a cohesive binding together of the personal and the collective liberation. The evolution of the magazine reveals that surrealism was the necessary thrust for Césaire between the early exploratory efforts to define négritude in prewar Paris and the firm commitment, artistically and politically, to eliminate the structure of colonialism after the war.

While still in Paris in the thirties, Aimé was quite aware that black entertainers were an imported thrill for the Parisian cultural circles. The vogue of art nègre was well-known among the few, young, black students in Paris. Aimé recorded in his Notebook of a Return to the Native Land with disgust for the popular image of himself as an alienated object:

> "Or else quite simple as they like to think of us!
> Cheerfully obscene, completely nuts about jazz to
> cover their extreme boredom.
> I can boogie-woogie, do the Lindy-hop and tap-dance.
> And for a special treat the muting of our cries muffled
> with wah-wah. Wait...
> Everything is as it should be. My good angel grazes
> the neon. I swallow batons. My dignity wallows
> in puke....."[6]

In July, 1941, there appeared in Tropiques the first text suggesting its intentions to familiarize Martinicans with their natural surroundings. This particular slant also helped accustom the readers to names of tropical plants in Césaire's poetry. This was dismissed by Europeans as "cultural exoticism"; however, Césaire's use of native concrete diction revealed a cultural implication. While writing in French, he also testified to a degree of authenticity, while producing a profusion of images of vegetation in an effort to put down roots. (enracinement).[7] In an attempt to bring Tropiques closer to the people of Martinique, Aimé and his colleague, René Ménil collaborated in the January, 1942 issue to include a brief account of Martinican folklore. What they found in Creole tales is hunger, fear, and defeat, the results of slavery. The nostalgia that tinted Césaire at this point is associated with an imaginary identification with African culture. Discussions of contemporary literature alluded to an "African surrealism" that is to be understood as the natural product of a civilization whose motives and modes are to be essentially different from the European.[8] He had definitely not lived in contact with an active voodoo tradition, but Césaire found moving a Negro-Cuban tale as related by Lydia Cabrera to be a "pact of friendship with the sun, the moon, the stars, the animal, the forest; ...poem to desire, to fear, to death, to power, to catastrophe, to life..."[9]

The end of the Second World War brought, also, a decided shift in the ideological position of Tropiques. In the final issue of September, 1945, Suzanne Césaire attacked existing social conditions in her anticolonialist article, "The Great Camouflage." The final salute to Martinique was made to a man well-known to the Martinicans, Victor Schoelcher, the French parliamentarian who had espoused the liberation of the slaves in the French Empire in 1848. Aimé's "Hommage to Victor Schoelcher," refocused the magazine from the poetic, individual values of surrealism to the contemporary economic and political realities of Martinique. These accents of political rhetoric were the words of the crucible of wartime Martinique, whose inspiration personally and poetically had come through surrealism, and now lay his future elsewhere with the exigencies of socialism in a postcolonial world. Cultural struggle was giving way to the political struggle.

At war's end Tropiques had run its course. Whereas Senghor had composed his Songs of Darkness (Chants d'ombre), Césaire had written his Notes on a Return to the Native Land. This work was written in 1938 at the age of 25, shortly before his return home. The work was book-length, free verse, free-form

which summarized his emotional, moral, and intellectual journey to manhood. Despite the absence of regular paragraphs, chapters, stanzas, there is some noticeable organization. Inspired by aesthetic freedom proclaimed already by surrealism, he departed from the meters, rhythms, and metaphors of classical French verse and spoke through his own language, vocabulary, imagery, beat and tempos of rhythm.[10] He had expressed in full strength what earlier West Indian poets had only attempted.

Distinct thematic movements can be identified:[11]

1.) an evocation of the native land:

> "Christmas was not like other feasts. It didn't lend itself to running the streets, dancing in the public squares, sitting astride wooden horses, profiting from the throng to pinch women, or setting of fireworks by the tamarind trees....in the evening a little unintimidating church amiably filling up with laughter, whisperings, secrets, scandals, declarations of love and the gutteral cacophony of an energetic singer,...and one feels good inside and eats good things and drinks good cheer, and there is pudding with milk in it and the liquid sunshine of the rums, and all sorts of good things that forcefully impose themselves upon your mucuous membranes....and you laugh and sing, and the choruses run on and on like coco trees as far as the eye can see..the joy bursts like a cloud. The singing doesn't stop...and truly one lives as in a dream, and drinks and shouts and sings...and dozes too as if in a dream with rose-petal eyelids,...with the smell of liquid dung from the cacao trees..."

2.) the quest for "which is mine":

> "...I would come to this country of mine and say to it:
> "Embrace me with out fear...And if all I know how to do is speak, it is for you that I shall speak."
> And here I am!
> ....these shovelfuls of shabby souls on the three-souled Caribbean, and all these futile deaths...
> This is mine, these few thousand humiliated souls circling round inside a calabash isle, and mine too the archipelago curved as if anxiously seeking to deny itself...to protect the more delicate slenderness separating one America from the other...one of the two incandescent versants through which the equator funambulates toward Africa...Guadeloupe in front of it...Haiti where negritude first stood up..."
> This is mine,
> a man alone
> imprisoned in white,
> a man alone who defies the whites
> cries of white
> death
> (Toussaint, Toussaint
> Louverture),....."

3.) the confrontation between the poet's childish imaginings of a glorious African history, his personal dream of heroism, and the ugly truths about him:
"I refuse to take my bombast for authentic glories and I laugh at my childish old imaginings.

No, we were never Amazons to the king of Dahomey, or Ghanian princes with eight hundred camels, or doctors in Timbuktu when Askia the Great was king...And since I've sworn to leave out nothing of our history,...I want to admit that for all time we have been rather wretched dishwashers, shoeshine boys with little scope,...And this country cried out for centuries that we were rudebeasts, that the pulsing of humanity stopped at Negro doors...and they marked us with red-hot irons, and we slept in our excrement and they sold us in public squares,...

We vomited from slaveships.
We, hunted in the Calebars.
What? Stop up our ears?
We, sotted to death from being rolled, mocked, jeered at,...

From the hold I hear the curses of the chained, the coughs of the dying,...the howling of a woman in labor...the snigger of the whip...

Nothing could ever urge toward noble, desparate adventure.
So be it. So be it.

I live for the flattest part of my soul,
For the dullest part of my flesh....

And these tadpoles within me hatched of my prodigious ancestry!
Those who invented neither gunpowder nor compass,
Those who never vanquished steam or electricity,
Those who explored neither seas nor sky,
But who know in its uttermost corners the landscape of pain...
Those who were inoculated with decay."

4.) the revelation:

"But what strange pride illuminates me suddenly?.....

O friendly light!
O fresh source of light!....

My negritude is not a stone, its deafness hurled against
The clamor the day;
My negritude is not a speck of dead water on the earth's dead eye,
My negritude is neither tower nor cathedral,..."

5.) an ascent to the famous celebration of négritude:

"Eia for the royal Kailcedrat!
Eia for those who never invented anything,
Who never explored anything,
Who never conquered anything,.....

Truly the eldest of the world,
Porous to all the breathing of the world,....
Spark of the sacred fire of the world,....

Listen to the white world,
Horribly weary from its enormous effort,
Its rebellious joint crack beneath the hard stars.
Its rigid, blue steel penetrates the mystic flesh;
Hear its traitorous victories trumpet its defeats;
Hear the grandiose alibis for its sorry stumblings,
Pity for our conquerors, omniscient and naive!...."

6.) the prophecy and dedication in which the poet's anger against the lies and crimes of the West, which have dehumanized his race, are subsumed in his refusal to hate, and on the "burning immensity of love" that fills him:

"Eyes fixed on the beautiful city I prophesy:
May I hear neither laughter nor cries,...
Give to my hands the power to mold,
Give to my soul the temper of steel,
I do not shrink.....

Make me rebel against all vanity but as docile to its genius,
As the fist is to the arm;....
Make of me a man who terminates,
...a man who initiates,
...a man who contemplates...
For now is the time to gird one's loins like a valiant man.

But in doing so, my heart, preserve me from all hatred,
Make not of me that man of hate
For whom I've only hate,...

You know my love to be tyrannical,
You know that it is not from hate
For other races.....
That I seek to be a plowman
Of this single race,.....
...that what I wish
For the universal hunger,
For the universal thirst,
Is to shake it free at last,.....

I am nothing but a man who no longer accepts being angry
Who has nothing in his heart any more
But a burning immensity of love."

7.) and last of the major themes is that of affirmation of the poet's vision of the world:

"I accept...I accept...entirely without reserve
My race that no ablution of hyssop and lilies could purify,
My race corroded with stains.....
Queen of sputum and leprosies,
Of whippings and scrofula,....

I accept, I accept...

Look, am I humble enough? Have I enough callouses on my knees?
Muscles in my back?
Groveling in mud....

Annular islands, lovely constellation,
I caress you with my ocean hands,....
And I lick you with my tongues of algae,
And I steer you clear of pirates,...I accept them!

And my original geography, as well; the map of the world made
For my use, not painted in the arbitrary colors of scholars,
But in the geometry of my shed blood, I accept,...

Flat, a color sufficiently melanian, and the negritude, no
Longer a cephalic index, or a plasma, or a soma, but
Measured on the compass of pain,...I accept, I accept all that.

...And now suddenly, strength and life charge through me
like a bull, and the wave of life surrounds the papilla of
the hill, and now all the veins and capillaries swell
with new blood, ...seismic pulsebeat now the measure of
a living body in my firm embrace.

And it is up to man to vanquish all deprivations immobilized
in the corners of his fervor.
And no race has the monopoly on beauty, intelligence, or
strength,
And there is a place for all at the rendezvous of conquest,
And we know now that the sun turns around our earth
illuminating the portion that our will alone had determined
and that any star falls from the sky to earth at our limitless
command..."

Césaire's Notes has won a unique place among French-speaking black students. Even young Africans identify themselves with Césaire rather than with their own Senghor and recite passages that reveal their own sentiments or burning desires. "Césaire's work has been truly the voice of Negro awareness of its sufferings and its needs" according to Belgian literary historian Lilyan Kesteloot. The emotional involvement and revelation testify that Césaire was not yet involved in political or communist attitudes; he was more consumed by the issues of colonialism, racism, and their threat on political and cultural annihilation.

Césaire's poetry since his Notes is admired by critics, but is far less known. His poetics have become more and more hermetic and difficult. His work expands into numerous essays on European colonialism, Harlem Renaissance poets, and the political, economics, and cultural situation of the West Indies. He, also, wrote, focusing on historical figures, Henri-Christophe, the Haitian ruler who succeeded Toussaint Louverture, Patrice Lumumba, assassinated Belgian Congo leader. The plots concern the plight of the newly freed peoples trying to cope with their problems of self-government and the conflicts of hopes, aspirations, deceptions, and realities of the leaders.

Aimé Césaire retired from teaching in 1944, after he was elected and re-elected several times to the twin posts of deputy to the French National Assembly for Martinique and mayor of its capital, Fort-de-France. After a referendum in 1946, the citizens of Martinique voted to remain with France and accept citizenship with metropolitan France. In 1956, Césaire renounced his ties with the French Communist Party brought on by his disillusionment and conflict between its theory and its delivery in daily life. He continues to work for economic and social reforms and their realization; nevertheless, he is still foremost a poet.

Other works of Aimé Césaire:
Miraculous Weapon (Les Armes miraculeuses), 1946;
Beheaded Sun (Soleil Cou Coupé), 1948;
Shackles (Ferrements), 1959;
Land Survey (Cadastre), 1961;
The Tragedy of King Christophe (Tragédie du roi Christophe), 1963;
A Season in the Congo (Une Saison au Congo), 1966;
Essays, Deliveries, etc.

FOOTNOTES

1. Clayton Eschleman and Annette Smith, Translators. Aimé Césaire. University of California Press, Berkeley: 1983. 2.

2. A. James Arnold, Modernism and Négritude. Howard University Press. Cambridge: 1981. 1.

3. Ibid. 8.

4. Aimé Césaire, "Introduction à la poésie nègre américaine, Tropiques no. 2 (July 1941), 37.

5. "Entretien avec Amié Césaire" in Tropiques, vol. 1 Paris: J. M. Place, 1978, X-XIII.

6. Eschleman, Aimé Césaire. 59.

7. Arnold, Modernism and Négritude. 91.

8. Ibid. 95.

9. Ibid. 94.

10. Ellen Conroy Kennedy, Ed. The Negritude Poets. The Viking Press. New York: 1975. 63.

11. Ibid. 64.

12. Ibid. 64.

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